

Southeast Fishery Bulletin

National Marine Fisheries Service • Southeast Regional Office • 9721 Executive Center Drive N., St. Petersburg, FL 33702

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NOAA Fisheries Issues Emergency Rule to Protect Leatherback Sea Turtles in Waters off Florida's East Coast

Shrimp Fishermen Required to Modify Trawls

The National Marine Fisheries Service (NOAA Fisheries) has issued an emergency rule that requires shrimp trawlers operating in Atlantic waters from the shoreline out to 10 nautical miles between 28 degrees north latitude (approximately - Melbourne, FL) and the Florida/ Georgia border to use TEDs with escape openings modified to exclude leatherback turtles. This emergency rule will be effective from December 14, 2001 through 11:59 p.m. January 13, 2002.

Basis of the Emergency Rule:

The Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission (FWCC) notified NOAA Fisheries that an extraordinarily high number of endangered leatherback sea turtles stranded along northeast Florida beaches in November and early December. Fifteen dead leatherback turtles washed ashore from St. Johns through Brevard counties in shrimp zones 28 and 29 between November 4 and December 10, 2001.

In addition, researchers conducting right whale aerial surveys slightly to the north of zone 29 documented the presence of leatherback turtles during two flights, one of which was dead. By comparison, the total annual number of leatherback strandings statewide has averaged 24 over the past 10 years, and has averaged only 14 per year in zones 28-30.

Leatherbacks are the world's largest species of sea turtle. Adults weigh between 600 and 1300 pounds and have carapaces (shells) five to six feet long. They are also the world's most wide-ranging sea turtle species, often migrating from the tropics to sub-Arctic waters to feed.

Considering the rarity of leatherbacks – an average of only 45-50 females nest in Florida each year – and the fact that strandings are only a minimum estimate of actual mortality, these strandings represent a serious impact to the recovery and survival of the local population.

Complete installation instructions can be found at 50 CFR §223.207(a)(7)(ii)(B)(1) or (2) or 223.207(c)(1)(iv)(B). In addition, anyone can obtain the specifications for the mandated modifications from the NOAA Fisheries' laboratory in Pascagoula, MS by calling 228-762-4591. That office's staff will mail or fax the specifications upon request. The hard TED and Parker soft TED specifications are posted on the NOAA Fisheries Southeast Regional web site: <http://caldera.sero.nmfs.gov/fishery/pannounc.gen/protann.99/newb999.htm>.

Additional sea turtle information at:
http://www.nmfs.gov/prot_res/turtles/turtle.html.